

The Secret Recipe



The Secret Recipe

by Roland Alden

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This book is dedicated to Roland H. Alden, Sr., who gave the characters
herein his sincere respect, and earned theirs in return.



Serving Hoppin' John Black-Eyed Peas on New Year's Day is an old Southern tradition, said to bring good luck and prosperity. Several theories exist as to the origin of the name Hoppin' John. One is that it was named after a children's game, which involved hopping around the table for luck before eating. Another story is that the original dish was so tasty that a chef or waiter, presumably named John, had to hop back and forth between kitchen and table to keep refilling the plates of appreciative diners. Some etymologists think Hoppin' John is derived from mispronunciations of the French term for black-eyed peas: pois a pigeon. That suggests a possible linkage back to Francophone Caribbean planters, and the belief in luck suggests a linkage to the Haitian practice of "Voodoo," which, through the slave trade, migrated from West Africa (particularly Benin and Nigeria) to the American South.



In Southern speech, present and past tense are indistinct, and plural forms are favored over the singular; perhaps this reflects a culture in which the past may offer more inspiration than the future, and the community, more so than the individual, is the focus of celebration. "Southern" seems an especially appropriate dialect for a story set during the Christmas season. Some readers will find the language difficult; the author suggests this story be read aloud. The ear will hear nuances the eye cannot see.

Summertime in Chester County, Tennessee is hot, humid, and eerily quiet, except for a chorus of crickets, eternally buzzing in the tall, dry oat grass that grows nearly everywhere. Small ponds, alive with catfish, filled with water made muddy by red clay soil and dark green algae, along with crops like cotton, soybeans, alfalfa, black-eyed peas and starchy corn (used mostly to feed pigs), fill the air with an earthy smell, occasionally cleansed by an approaching thunderstorm. On such a day, in August of 1961, news of “Aunt” Pearl’s death came.



Aunt Pearl in her younger days.

Aunt Pearl was ninety-one years old, so there was little surprise in her passing. My daddy asked Uncle Will's nephew, Houston, why it was that Aunt Pearl died, and Houston said, "She just plain wore out." Her funeral would be well attended, but it wasn't entirely because of a great sorrow. No sir, what had everybody between Pinson, Finger and Sweet Lips worried sick was the notion that Aunt Pearl may have taken her secret recipe to the grave.

The facts are Aunt Pearl was known; far away as Bolivar, and maybe even Memphis, for her Hoppin' John. Nobody could remember *ever* having Hoppin' John better than Aunt Pearl's and more to the point, come New Year's, it was Aunt Pearl's Hoppin' John that brought good luck to Chester County; poor folks and rich folks alike. 'Course there ain't been too much luck around here lately, but in her day Aunt Pearl's John did get better results than other divinations that people tried. Like that preacher from Tupelo; the one that was rumored to be Houston's real father. Well, let's nevermind about that.

Come Sunday nearly everybody turned out for Aunt Pearl. The church was a tiny little dirt floor place near Tally's Cotton Gin. People said all kinds of snake handling and whatnot went on in that church. The folks were mostly poor tenant farmers, evangelicals; Aunt Pearl was never known to miss a Thursday night meeting. They just about had her burial on a Thursday out of respect, but everybody figured that more relations would come on Sunday. The crowd was singing and hollerin'; and Houston just about fell over himself with grief and went to Jesus right there on the spot. His real mother died giving birth to him and Aunt Pearl was the only mother he ever knewed. I didn't see no snakes that day, which was something of a surprise, as there had to be twenty pig snakes out in them bushes.

This was the last funeral this church would ever see; piles of dead leaves caught fire that autumn and

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the little church burned down. Most everybody moved to the big tin and cement New Carmel C.M.E. church over in Pinson. It's a damm shame too; poor old Aunt Pearl was the last one to be buried out there in that lonesome weed patch.

The Reverend kind'a rushed through the service; it seemed like everybody wanted to git over to the Morris place for lunch, and to socialize. Mr. Tally, who owned the land the Morris family farmed, wad'nt payin' much for cotton that year, so peoples was just plain dirt poor and needed a little entertainment. The next few years would bring very hard times to Chester County. Aunt Pearl up and died in the nick'a time if you axe me.

It would have been indecent to bring up the matter of the recipe with Uncle Will directly whilst he was still grievin' an all; and it would'a been useless anyway. Will Morris knew as much about cookin' as a Tennessee Possum knows about playing the organ. It wouldn't do no good to ask Houston, neither. He ate more of Aunt Pearl's cookin' than anybody else in Chester County, and worked that truck garden behind the Morris' house. He must'a know'd somethin' about what went into Aunt Pearl's kitchen; but, Houston was not entirely all there, if you know what I mean.

Joe Morris was the Wills' only son and what with he and his wife Imogene livin' barely a five-minute tractor ride from Aunt Pearl's backyard, and what with Imogene being a purdy good cook and all, a right thinkin' person might assume that Imogene woulda' known somethin' of Aunt Pearl's recipes.

Imogene was a big woman that made extra money puttin' up milk and cream in leftover gallon mayonnaise jars. She sold them for a quarter out her kitchen door. An she was always willin' to hep out with the church picnics or take some fried chicken over to anybody that was sick. She often cooked up something for Houston to take over to Uncle Will when he or Aunt Pearl was feelin' poorly.

Some time after the funeral, a group of ladies paid a visit to Imogene. Imogene fixed iced tea and they all set out on the front porch. Imogene assumed they were there as a courtesy because of Aunt Pearl be'in family and all. Finally, Mrs. Eleanor Pettibone brought up the matter of the Hoppin' John. "Imogene," Mrs. Pettibone spoke in a quiet voice, "what about that Hoppin' John?"

Imogene seemed surprised by the question and hesitated for what seemed an eternity. "I knowed what ya'll be thinkin'" Imogene finally started, "but I ain't got that recipe." "I never once went over thar to hep Aunt Pearl 'cause I was always doing my own church cookin' for New Year's 'n all." "Sometimes Aunt Pearl would call for some collards and what not and I'd send Joe or Houston over thar with a mess of 'em; but I ain't got no idear what she done to make that John Hop they way she did."

Everbody was silent for a while. The barn wasn't that far from the house. Most of the ladies were using paper fans from Johnson's Funeral Home to discourage the flies. Mary Elizabeth Hutcherson finally spoke up. "You don't think she took that recipe to her grave do you?" Imogene studied the porch floor.

"Land sakes Imogene what was ya'll thinkin' to let her die off like that without passin' on that recipe. It ain't like we don't have enough bad luck around here already, and ya'll Morris's up an lose the only luck we ever had?" Mary Elizabeth was annoyed.

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“What in tarnation are we gonna do now?” said Mrs. Pettibone’s daughter-in-law, Lucy-Nadine. She was fanning herself at an agitated tempo.

“Ladies, let’s not get all hot’n bothered over this jest yet.” First off, Aunt Pearl turned out enough Hoppin’ John last year to feed the whole church twenty times over; there was people from as fur away as Henderson comin’ over thar and gittin’ some. I made enough cornbread to feed ever-hog in Chester County, and when I ran out...Aunt Pearl *still* had John left over.” “Now that was last year when Aunt Pearl was ninety years old; ain’t nobody actually knowd how old she was, but she was Old. She was feelin’ poorly and there just ain’t no way she turned out all that John her self.” “She must’a had some hep somewheres and I’ll bet I know who it was.”

Everbody on the porch held their breath.

“It had’ta be that Ona Mae!” shouted Lucy-Nadine. “Yes ma’am” said Imogene. “She was always hepin’ Aunt Pearl in the kitchen, and she had two rows out in Uncle Will’s truck garden and was always growin’ some greens and what not there. Aunt Pearl would even send her over to Henderson now and then to buy groceries. Ain’t no way Ona Mae can’t tell us sumpthin’bout Aunt Pearl’s cookin’!”

The ladies were more speechless than elated by this news. After a long silence, Mrs. Pettibone finally had the nerve to say what everbody was thinkin: “Imogene,” Mrs. Pettibone was tentative, “that Ona Mae is colored. Are you tellin’ me that the only person in this world Aunt Pearl trusted her Hoppin’ John recipe to was a Nigra woman! Land sakes Imogene! What is the matter with y’all?”

“Eleanor, I ain’t happy about this neither, but like I sed, I was too busy ’round the holidays to git involved with Aunt Pearl and her damm Hoppin’ John. Besides, her John wasn’t all that special if you axe me; it really only started bringing us luck in the last few years.”

“When did Ona Mae go to work for Aunt Pearl anyway?” asked Lucy-Nadine.

“Wellum, let me think. It was back when Houston run over hisself with that tractor; about 1957” said Imogene. There was a long silence. “I guess I’d better talk to that Ona Mae right directly.”



Ona Mae Daily was a short, ample woman who lived in Pinson and worked for Mrs. Tally cleaning house. Ona Mae was visitin’ her daughter in Memphis when Aunt Pearl died. It wurn’t until at least a week after the funeral that she come back to Tally’s and got word that Imogene was trying to find her. Houston went over to fetch Ona Mae one day and bring her to Imogene. Ona Mae started to git in the back of Houston’s pickup but Houston said it was too dusty and hot to ride back thar and she was welcome to sit up front if she wanted; it bein’ 1961 and all. Ona Mae was nervous but agreed.

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They rode in silence. Ona Mae didn't dare axe Houston what Imogene wanted. She figger'd there must be some trouble; or, thinking more brightly, perhaps Imogene just wanted her to look in on Uncle Will ever now and then.

When they pulled up to the Morris farmhouse Imogene was waitin' outside for Ona Mae. "Ona Mae, how are you? Was it Memphis that you run off to I hear? We've had a lot of goings on out here while you been away."

"Yes'um. I'm real sorry about Miss Pearl."

"Ona Mae, you been workin' for Aunt Pearl and Uncle Will for some time now?"

"Yes'um. I went to Miss Pearl back when Mr. Houston broke his arm and all."

"Well Ona Mae, did you ever hep Aunt Pearl with her cookin' and what not?"

"Oh yes'um I did. I even took care of the garden some, when Mistah Will was feelin' poorly." Maybe Imogene *was* interested in hiring her to cook for Uncle Will.

"Is that so? Well then, tell me Ona Mae. Did you ever hep out Aunt Pearl around New Year's? You know, when it come time to make some Hoppin' John?"

"Oh yes'um. You know she had to cook up quite a mess'a John and it was a sight."

"Well then, you must know what recipe Aunt Pearl used for Hoppin' John?"

Ona Mae suddenly froze up.

"Ona Mae, is you alright?"

"Yes'um."

"Well, did you hear what I axed? Do you know Aunt Pearl's recipe for Hoppin' John?" "You know now that she's gone to her reward I'm gonna have to make it this year?"

"Yes'um; but. Well. Ma'am. Miss Pearl told me never to tell No body."

"Tell no body what?"

"How to fix them John."

"Ona Mae what you sayin'? It's not like it's a secret!" Imogene tried bluffing.

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“Yes’um; I didn’t know it was a secret neither, but after I showed her about them roots an all she told me not to tell nobody.”

“After *you* showed *her*?”

“Yes’um. You know a while back Miss Pearl weren’t gettin’ much luck with her John ’n I told her it were’cause she ain’t got the recipe right. So I show’ed her how to put some luck into it; an after that, she told me to keep it all a secret.”

Ona Mae was beginning to think she might be in trouble. Practicing magic was the kind of thing that got her mother’s generation in trouble with the Klan.

“Ona Mae, you mean to tell me that it was *you* that put the luck into Aunt Pearl’s Hoppin’ John?”

“Well’um, I reckon so.”

“Well I’ll be.” “Now, Ona Mae, when Aunt Pearl told you not to tell nobody about the recipe you know what she meant don’t you?”

“Yes’m.” “Um. I mean, Nome.”

“Well, what she meant was that you wurn’t to tell no *colored* people.”

“But ma’am; colored people already know how to make Hoppin’ John.” Ona Mae immediately regretted this outburst of candor. “I’m pretty sure Aunt Pearl told me don’t tell *No-body*.”

Imogene decided to try a different approach. “Ona Mae, of course you wurn’t s’pose to tell nobody, but that was before Aunt Pearl up and died. Surely she didn’t want to take that recipe with her to the grave now; she always meant to tell me; I mean, I’m *family* ’n all, but we-all just never got around to it what with bein’ busy and all ’round that time of year. She surely didn’t mean to say you can’t tell *me*.”

Ona Mae at this point was cornered. If she didn’t tell Imogene what she wanted to know word might git back to Mr. Tally, who might not want to hear about an uppity Negro; and if bad luck came to the whole county they would no doubt all blame her. At the same time, she was close to startin’ trouble with her own ancestors.

“Ma’am. That Hoppin’ John that Aunt Pearl fixed wurn’t what you might think. Hit had a *number* of roots in it, cooked up the way my momma used to down in Hattisburg. *Her* momma was a root docta’h an she told me some of these things what’dat come from Africa and have magic in ’em. You can be in a peck’a trouble messin’ with dem roots if you don’t do it just right. Aunt Pearl let me fix most of the greens come New Year’s ’cause she just got too old to foller all the recipes. If I showed you what all truck goes in’ta this John and you didn’t git it just right, we alls could be in’a heap of trouble with dem spirits, maybe even the devil hizself. There could be some kinda bad luck around here; maybe for the whole year. Maybe for longer den dat.”

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“Sweet Jesus Ona Mae! You are scarin’ me now.”

“I’m sorry Ma’am; I’s scared too. It was Aunt Pearl that made me do it.”

“Well Ona Mae one thing is for sure. Aunt Pearl was right about keepin’ this all a secret. I don’t want you to tell no-body. Not no white people. Not no culluds. I don’t even want you ta tell me!”

“Yes Ma’am.” Ona Mae felt some relief at this news.

“Now; come New Year’s Eve I want you to git over here and hep me fix them Hoppin’ John for the church. Peoples expect the Morris family to bring some Hoppin’ John, Aunt Pearl or no Aunt Pearl. Lord hep me if Chester County don’t have some luck next year.”

“Yes Ma’am.”

“N I’ll pay you to look in on Uncle Will now and then too. You can grow whatever we’re gonna need in that truck garden, just like you did for Aunt Pearl.”

“Yes Ma’am.”

Ona Mae went to Memphis for Christmas that year. Her daughter lived there with thirteen children and no husband. Rumor had it that at least a few of the children were really Ona Mae’s, but Ona Mae always called them her grandchillren. Sadly, about mid-December, after everybody had gone to bed, the Christmas tree caught fire. The little woodframe house burned right down and all the children perished. There was no luck that year for Ona Mae’s family. In spite of the tragedy; or perhaps because of it, Ona Mae came back to Imogene’s around noon on December 31, just in time to make Hoppin’ John for the midnight church social.



“Ona Mae, thank the lord you are here!” “Did you have a nice Christmas in Memphis?”

“Nome.”

“Well that’s nice.” “I mean. Why is that? You didn’t have a nice Christmas this year?”

“Nome. My child’s house burned down and all my grandchirren died.”

“My lord! Ona Mae, I’m so sorry.” “How many grandchildren did you have?”

Ona Mae reached into her purse, unfolded a newspaper, and handed it to Imogene. Imogene gasped when she read the small item on page twenty-two of the December 18 Memphis Press-Scimitar: “*13 Children*”

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Die in Fire... A Christmas tree ignited last night while a Southaven family slept...

“Ona Mae, I am so sorry. How is your daughter?”

“Well’um, she lost her home an all her chirrin’ and she can’t even pay the funeral bill. It cost thirty nine hunnurd dolla’s just to bury those chillins’ and her church can’t carry that much.”

“Let me keep this newspaper Ona Mae. Next week I’ll talk to Mr. Talley and maybe Mr. Cantrell at the bank in Henderson and we’ll see what-all we can do. It sho’ does seem like everbody could use some luck this coming year.”

“Yes’um.”

“Now Ona Mae, is you up to heping me fix some Hoppin’ John for tonight? This is the first year we alls going to be visitin’ that new church in Pinson.”

“Yes’um.”

“Good. Now, I think it would be best if you fixed the recipe how you always done for Aunt Pearl. Don’t you think that’s what we-all need to do?”

“Yes ma’am. We need all the luck we kin git.”

“Well then, you tell me what you want me to do. Ona Mae Daily, today, in this kitchen, you are the boss.”

“Yes’um. Thank-you ma’am.” “Why don’t you shell them black eyed peas? I gots to get over to Aunt Pearl’s place to pick some greens.”

“I’ll get Houston to drive you over thar in his tractor.”

When Ona Mae returned, she and Houston brought at least a dozen baskets of greens into the kitchen. There was spinach and onions, okra, turnip greens, dandelion greens, collard greens, beet greens, garlic, scallions, pig weed, poke weed, kale, and roots galore. Turnip roots, poke roots, dandelion roots...

“Land sakes Ona Mae.” “Whatchew-all gonna do with all that mess?”

“Ma’am we need some fat-back.”

“Yes, ma’am. There’s half’a pig right in that-there icebox.”

Ona Mae started up two burners on Imogene’s electric stove and put a big cast iron pot across both. She tossed some ham hocks, fat and onions into the pot and soon the kitchen was getting smoky and fragrant.

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“Ona Mae,” Imogene thought twice about interrupting, “what is all these roots for?”

“Roots is what brings the luck, ma’am.”

Imogene picked up a knife and started to dice something, but Ona Mae stopped her.

“Ma’am, you can’t cut the turnips before you cut up the pokes.”

“Ona Mae, what difference could it make what *order* they be cut up?”

“The turnips will scare off the bad luck in the pokes.” “You gots to save the turnips until the bad luck is outta the pokes; else there will be trouble.”

“Lord help me Ona Mae.” “If that pokeweed has bad luck why all did you bring it in here in the first place? Tell me that!”

“The poke has good luck too; once you chase off the bad luck.”

Ona Mae then threw a pokeroot into the pot followed by handfuls of pigweed and collards. More sizzling and smoke ensued. She stared into the pot and whispered, “Oh lordy, Miss Imogene, I kin see the devil takin’ those chilins’ right now.”

It was getting dark. Imogene’s husband Joe stuck his head in the door and saw Imogene frowning at him; he thought better of going in there and left. Imogene paced nervously and tended her peas. Ona Mae could hear the screams of her grandchildren trying to breath through the smoke. She picked up some okra and yellow onions; with each slice that fell into the pot she spoke a child’s name. “Calvin, Odie, Marion, Etha Mae, Lorraine, Mahaley, Elsie Mae, Jessie, Ada, Udell, Pearlie, Luetta, Esterlee.”

The pot was now almost three quarters full at which point Ona Mae folded in some turnip greens and started talking to the pot in a combination of strange languages. “Obe . . . Efo . . . Mami Wata” Imogene could not comprehend anything Ona Mae said. Finally, Ona Mae took seven candles out of her purse and set them up in a straight line on the stovetop. She lit the left three candles first; the right three candles next; said a few more words that Imogene could not understand and then lit the middle candle. “Ananse . . . Orisha . . . Oya . . . Mmoatia.”

The smells that filled the room reminded Imogene of Aunt Pearl’s Hoppin’ John from years past; although it was now clear, they were always the work of Ona Mae. Imogene realized that there was no way she could ever remember or understand the secret recipe. Ona Mae turned the burners down to low, and took a small envelope out of her bosom and poured in somethin’ that looked like spice. She started to stir when suddenly she staggered back from the stove as if she’d been hit; and then she started to faint.

“Ona Mae!” Ona Mae was a heavy woman and Imogene was alarmed at the thought of her fainting. “You better set yourself down.” A big picnic table was in the middle of Imogene’s kitchen. Ona Mae bumped into

the table and sat down.

“Thank-you Ma’am.”

It was almost eight o’clock in the evening.

“Miss Imogene, you should go git yourself some sleep. I’ll finish them beans’n rice in time for midnight. I need t’keep an eye on them greens; the devil is still in this here room, and I don’t want him stealin’ our luck.”

“Sweet Jesus Ona Mae. Ya’ll be careful.”



About ten-thirty Joe, Chester and Imogene helped Ona Mae git everthing loaded up into the back of Joe’s Ford station wagon for the drive over to Pinson. Ona Mae rode in back to keep an eye on the Hoppin’ John. When they got to the church there was hundreds of people from all around singin’ and celebratin’ and what all. The church was big enough to have several long tables set up inside for the food. There were plenty of children running around and folks dancin’ inside and out, since this wurn’t no Baptist church. As soon as Ona Mae and Houston started unloadin,’ peoples came ’round asking about Aunt Pearl’s Hoppin’ John. Imogene shooed ’em away. “We ain’t gonna be ready until midnight now; y’all run off an git some sodas over there at Miss Tally’s table. You don’t want to spoil the luck.”

Eleanor Pettibone come up to Imogene and said, in a slightly sarcastic voice, “Well Imogene, we alls glad to see you and *Ona Mae* here tonight.” Imogene knew that she was not pleased to see a Negro in the church, but on the other hand, she knew this probably meant that the Hoppin’ John would be as good as what Aunt Pearl used to make. “Ya’ll think we’re gonna have some luck this comin’ year?” Eleanor asked nobody in particular.

Ona Mae set up a Coleman stove and began to heat up some pork fat and greens just to give off a good smell and warm up everthing else. About ten minutes to midnight, she put the greens, rice, and beans together so that it would all be nice’n hot for everbody. At midnight, the crowd came ’round the table to get a taste of Aunt Pearl’s Hoppin’ John. Imogene whispered “Ona Mae, tell me, is that devil you saw this evenin’ still in them greens?”

“Oh no ma’am. He’s somewheres out there tonight, but he’s a scared’a these here Hoppin’ Johns; they gonna’ be lucky fo’ sho’.”

“I is mighty glad to hear you say that. You know, you all’s been workin’ all day and night. If you be tired why don’t you just git on home? Houston can hep me pack up this mess when we-all done.”

“Thank-you ma’am. I’m sho’nuff tired.”

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Ona Mae set off towards her house. Back then Pinson wern't much bigger than Finger; it wouldn't take her long to git across town. She was walkin' on the side of Highway 45 and there weren't no moon up. In the dark came a pickup truck filled with some riled up white boys, just as Ona Mae was crossin' a narrow low cement bridge over a piece'a swamp. Ona Mae could hear them boys hollerin' and see from the headlights that the truck was swervin' all over the road; she knew she had to git off that bridge into the crik. It weren't but a couple of feet down, the crik didn't have hardly no water, and the bottom was sandy. She fell, but didn't git hurt. The truck rolled on past and thank goodness them boys didn't even see Ona Mae; but when Ona Mae walked through some bushes, by the side of the crik, to git back up on the road, she stepped on a big old water moccasin snake. Well damm, if that snake didn't up and bit Ona Mae right on her ankle. She was only able to take a few steps back towards the crik and then set right down as a dizzy spell come over her. The last thing Ona Mae Daily said before she died was "I know'd you be out here t'night." It would be two days before her body was discovered.

Back at the church Imogene was getting complements for her "Aunt Pearl's Hoppin' John" and folks was mighty pleased with how it turned out. The Reverend Bedford Malone came by to pay his respects to Aunt Pearl's family. "Imogene, I know that yo' Aunt Pearl wasn't a member of this church but everbody here had the utmost respect for her and we alls are so glad to see you carryin' on her traditions." "I'm going over to pay Mr. and Mrs. Tally a visit later on today and I gots to git myself some cream..." Imogene interrupted: "Reverend you just come on by and I'll fix you up a jug of fresh cream and set out some iced tea too; I got somethin' I have to talks to you about anyways."



About mid-afternoon, a black Buick turned off the road and headed towards the Morris farmhouse. Imogene sent Houston out to shoo off their dogs so they wouldn't bother the Reverend when he got out of his car. Houston escorted the Reverend Malone around to the front of the house where the sun porch was. "Reverend Malone, welcome to the Morris home, we alls so glad you honored us with a visit."

"Imogene, it's my pleasure. Mrs. Tally spoke highly of you, Joe, and Aunt Pearl especially. We are so sorry about your loss."

"Reverend, set yur'self down and have some tea."

"And how is Will Morris holding up?"

"Oh Reverend he's fine for a widow man over ninety-five years old. I have Ona Mae visitin' him now and then, and of course Houston practically lives over thar anyway, so he's looked after."

"Was that Ona Mae I saw last night hepin' you at the social?" The Reverend was a distant relative of Nathan Bedford Forrest, the founder of the Ku Klux Klan, so Imogene was unsure exactly what to make of his notice.

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“Yes it was, Reverend. You know she works for the Tally’s too. That Ona Mae is a good cook. In fact, Reverend, there is somethin’ about Ona Mae that I wanted to talk to you about.”

“What’s that Imogene?”

“Well, just you set right there. I need to go fetch somethin’ to show you.” Imogene went inside the screen door to a sideboard in the dining room where she had saved the page that Ona Mae had given her. She hurried back out to the porch and handed it to the Reverend. “It’s the Memphis newspaper, look right thar on the bottom; read that about poor Ona Mae’s family.”

The Reverend found the article on page twenty-two: *“13 Children get Visit from Santa... A Southaven family got an early visit from Santa Claus yesterday, thanks to a Salvation Army program for needy children ...”*

Imogene waited nervously while the Reverend read the article. She didn’t know how he would take her request that the church help a colored family. She hoped the fact that Ona Mae worked for the Tally’s would side in her favor. Finally, the Reverend stopped reading and looked at Imogene.

“Imogene, that’s really nice. I didn’t know that Ona Mae had such a large family. I’m glad they were able to have a happy Christmas.”

As Imogene heard the Reverend’s words she almost fainted; she suppressed a gasp as she reached for the newspaper and took it back. The Reverend sensed something was wrong. Imogene scoured the page for the headline she knew was there *“13 Children Die...”* but all she saw was what the Reverend had seen. She started to re-read the article slowly.

“Imogene, is you alright?”

“I’m sorry Reverend; just have yourself some more iced tea. I need’ta refresh my memory.”

Imogene closed her eyes for a few minutes. She could see Ona Mae talkin’ to them candles and pots on the stove. She didn’t say a word for the longest time. Finally she spoke.

“Yes, Reverend it is nice what that Salvation Army is doing over there in Memphis. Maybe we should be doing somethin’ like that here in our church. But that’s not what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Ya see, it’s about the Hoppin’ John. Now, I know a good Christian man such as yoself must frown on peoples believing in it bringin’ luck’n all.”

“Imogene, everbody ’round here knows that the Lord worked through Aunt Pearl, and there ain’t no doubt in my mind that her Hoppin’ John he’ped that little church. And everbody knows it was her secret recipe; I’m real pleased to see ya’ll carryin’ on her tradition with us at New Carmel.”

“That’s just it Reverend. I got’s ta tell you the truth. Reverend Malone, that Hoppin’ John wern’t never

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made by Aunt Pearl. All the luck in that John these last few years come from Ona Mae! I watched her cook that John last night in my own kitchen, and I'm tellin' you, what I saw was scarin' me. I don't even know what I seen." Imogene was agitated. "Ona Mae was talkin' to the devil Reverend! There was all kinds of goings on!"

"Imogene, calm down now. I understand what you be sayin' and there just ain't no call for panic..." In fact, the Reverend was hisself purdy shocked at this news. "...We have to think this thing through Imogene. I know if we both pray on this here problem the Lord will show us the path. Do you hear me Imogene?"

"Yes Reverend."

The Reverend seemed to be thinkin' for a while.

"Now Imogene, there's one thing we have to understand... Are you listening?"

"Yes Reverend."

"Imogene, we can't be tellin' no-body about this; ya hear?"

"Yes Reverend."

"If somebody complements you on that Hoppin' John, you just tell'em thank-you. This matter of Ona Mae, and all; well, let's just keep that betwixt you and I."

Imogene didn't immediately respond. She seemed to think over things for quite a spell. Finally, she arrived at the same judgment the Reverend had.

"Reverend; I won't tell no-body. That recipe is gonna *stay* a secret."

THE END